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2013

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José Vergara

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## Chapter 6

# Cognitive Play in Daniil Kharms' "Blue Notebook №10"<sup>1</sup>

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## 1. Introduction

As a master of the alogical and nonsensical, Daniil Kharms forces language into the most unusual of combinations. From his nonsensical poetry and children's literature to the short *Incidents* and other prose, he intentionally brings together situations, words, and meanings in odd compositional arrangements. Through this deconstructive, seemingly anarchic method he activates certain linguistic functions and allows his readers to see beyond the logical world and into what he considered the world of *true* meanings (Kharms & Vvendensky, 1997, pp. 248-250) and the "purity of order" (Kharms, 2001, p. 79-80). The attainment of this higher order comes from a radical rethinking of literature and language as such. For Kharms writing is a performance and reading an event that actively implicates his audience. If we typically use language to construct and to ground ourselves within reality, then Kharms' language attempts to reverse such a process and reveal the inconsistencies of existence by releasing words from their traditional meaning in this cognitive space. What we see, instead, are the new and explosive meanings created by those juxtapositions. The reader is able to experience the world anew due to Kharms' awareness of cognitive play.

Adopting a cognitive and ethnolinguistic approach can help elucidate exactly how and why Kharms' artistic methods manage to accomplish these goals. Though the language of his *Incidents* cycle may be straightforward, the intricate manner in which Kharms constructed the texts speaks to a desire to invert expectations and experience on many levels. Neil Carrick has defined Kharms' prose as a "'collision' with a familiar, hackneyed narrative sequence" (Carrick, 1995, p. 708), that is archetypal narratives and literary utterances. Kharms relies on this "pre-text" (a prototype), understood by the reader on some level, to invert

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank David Danaher, Karen Evans-Romaine, and Jenny Jalack for their careful readings of this chapter in its various stage of development.

the art of writing at large. I argue that his generic and stylistic parodies are in turn supplemented by the parodic treatment of linguistic regularities. In short, an awareness of the cognitive and linguistic tricks that Kharms uses will illuminate the literariness of his prose. These techniques include blending concepts and construals,<sup>2</sup> reversing prototypical reading processes, and layering of metaphor and metonymy. Such an analysis provides further insights into the nature of the author's choices in language and how these impact readers' intake of the text.

Jerzy Bartmiński's approach to ethnolinguistic analysis has been a vital catalyst in the development of these ideas. Bartmiński has proposed that "culture exists in language and constitutes its inalienable component" (Bartmiński, 2009/2012, p. 11). The manner in which we comprehend both texts (cultural artifacts) and the world is thus always linked to the language we use. Moreover, Bartmiński assigns the following elements to the style of a text: "the worldview projected in a given style, the ontological status of that worldview, the rationality and communicative intentions it assumes" (p. 14). Each statement, whether written or spoken, then presupposes a particular conceptualization of reality. Behind this outlook lie the cognitive (or ethnolinguistic) values found inherently in the words one uses.

Using "Blue Notebook №10" (*Golubaya tetrad' №10*) as a primary case study, I will explore the connections between Kharms' prose and the cognitive and ethnolinguistic processes at work in order to describe how Kharms manipulates construals for precise aesthetic effect. The cognitive-semantic relationship between the concepts BE and HAVE in Russian plays a most prominent role throughout Kharms' *Incidents* cycle, a collection of thirty texts with little in common other than a predilection for senseless violence, unexpected turns of action, and the disorientating jerk of an unresolved ending. As such, I will begin with a short overview of the linguistic details concerning these two concepts – EXISTENCE (BEING) and POSSESSION (HAVING) – in relation to Kharms' text. My focus will fall on apparently minute details when discussing this connection to Kharms' "Blue Notebook №10" more closely, but linguistic analysis reveals exactly why these elements make the text so particularly effective and rich in meaning. After detailing Kharms' use of BE/HAVE, I will consider additional related forms of cognitive play in "Blue Notebook №10": the scale of subject definiteness as well as modes of sentence scanning. These considerations will lead naturally to a brief examination of Kharms' cognitive play in other stories from the same cycle. Finally,

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<sup>2</sup> Taylor defines construal as the "process by which a given state is structured by a language-user for purposes of its linguistic expression" (2002, p. 589). Each individual "construes" any given phenomenon (a scene, person, object, etc.) in a different manner depending on his or her mental experience. For example, "the lamp may be above the table" or, conversely, "the table below the lamp." The notion comes from Langacker's Cognitive Grammar, whose author in a recent publication defines it as "our manifest ability to conceive and portray the same situation in alternate ways" (Langacker, 2008, p. 43).

I will conclude by reflecting on translations of Kharm's "Blue Notebook №10" in order to further elucidate the cognitive-ethnolinguistic essence of my analysis. Ultimately, I will show how the meaning of Kharm's texts is not only a product, but inherently a *function* of his language as well. The meaning or message that Kharm wishes to convey is encoded into the very fabric of his words.

## 2. BEING and HAVING in Russian

Much has been written about the connection in Russian between BE and HAVE, which may be understood either purely linguistically or from a wider cognitive and philosophical perspective. Here I will provide an outline of materials most relevant to the present analysis. Most importantly, Steven Clancy (2001; 2005) has proposed a semantic nexus for BECOMING-BEING-UNBECOMING that takes into account all the multifarious lexical and semantic notions shared by BE and HAVE. The two concepts are shown to express many categories of meaning. Table 6.1 features a selection of Clancy's findings.

Table 6.1 The BECOMING-BEING-UNBECOMING NEXUS (adapted from Clancy, 2001)

CATEGORY	BECOMING	BEING	UNBECOMING
<i>existence</i>	MAKE/DO BECOME	BE	(UNMAKE)
<i>possession</i>	GIVE, TAKE GET	HAVE	TAKE, GIVE LOSE
<i>creation</i>	CREATE	EXIST	DESTROY

These conceptual items, not always expressed by verbs, make up "the notions most likely to become new expressions of BE and HAVE, as well as the semantic ideas most likely to be grammaticalized as auxiliary verbs" (Clancy, 2001, p. 5). Kharm's manipulation of construals is rooted in these cognitive-semantic categories, and I will show how his untraditional approach to writing partly gains its effect from an awareness of cognitive linguistic play at the syntactic and lexical levels. Clancy's nexus will serve as the primary analytical tool toward this understanding.

Clancy demonstrates the correlation between the two concepts (see Figure 6.1).<sup>3</sup> Among the various Slavic languages, Russian features the most

<sup>3</sup> Clancy's model might benefit from reworking in terms of Fauconnier and Turner's (2003) theory of conceptual blending, but this falls outside the scope of the present contribution.

complicated semantic map<sup>4</sup> for BE/HAVE. Due to similar mapping in meaning, structure, function and a lack of a clear verbal expression for HAVE, the two concepts are often expressed in the same manner. As will be shown, Kharms’ texts, particularly “Blue Notebook №10,” make use of this blending that allows for an expansion of meaning.

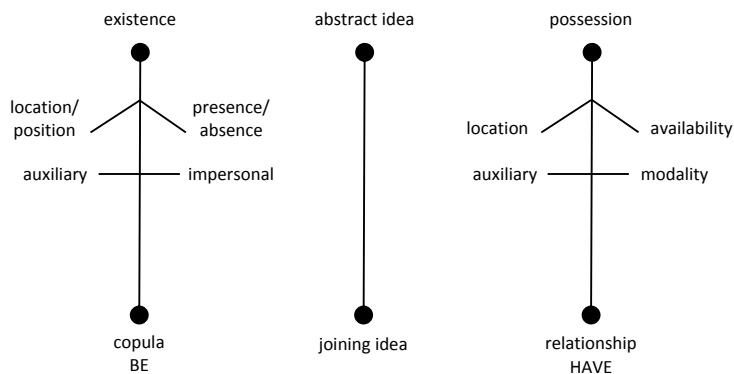


Fig. 6.1 Blended Prototype Model (from Clancy, 2001, p. 4)

A historical analysis of the shift from BE to HAVE for all languages shows that the roots of this blended prototype model lie in metonymy and metaphor, the former a particularly critical device in Kharms’ works. An expression for EXISTENCE can appear “by metonymy, reinterpreted as metaphor, from an expression for RHOMATIC POSSESSION” (Koch, 1999, p. 297). Kharms utilizes such a metonymic and metaphoric link throughout “Blue Notebook №10” with reference to body parts and BEING; this cognitive play elevates, if subtly and at the level of the individual words, the meaning of the whole text and endows it with greater philosophical import. It moves POSSESSION into the sphere of EXISTENCE. These are some of the linguistic nuances that Kharms’ *Incidents* frequently aestheticize.

### 3. The BE/HAVE Nexus and “Blue Notebook №10”

I will now investigate the function of the BE/HAVE nexus in Kharms’ story. “Blue Notebook №10” is Kharms at his most playful and serves as the best example of the sort of cognitive manipulations utilized throughout the cycle. He wrote

<sup>4</sup> A graphic representation of all possible meanings associated with a term or concept, e.g. BE or HAVE.

this well-known text in January 1937 as part of the *Blue Notebook* (*Golubaya tetrad'*) and later selected it for inclusion in the *Incidents* (*Sluchai*) cycle of 1939. It should be noted that Kharms' so-called mature works, as opposed to his children's literature, were for the most part not published in Russia until the advent of *glasnost'*. His drafts and notebooks, which were preserved by family and friends after his arrest in 1941 remain in varying degrees of (dis)order, but Kharms himself collated the thirty stories and drew up a title page for a theoretical future publication.<sup>5</sup> The two versions of the text differ in very few ways, perhaps even by just two words. I will first discuss the general nature of the cognitive play in "Blue Notebook №10," then move on to the significance of changes between the two versions of the text in conjunction with the BE/HAVE nexus. Finally, I will take up the issue of other related forms of cognitive play that Kharms deploys in his story, including shifts in definiteness and inverted sentence scanning. All of this cognitive play, as will become evident, is linked to the BE/HAVE nexus.

Only a few lines long, "Blue Notebook №10" stands among the shortest and certainly most famous of Kharms' works:

Был один рыжий человек, у которого не было глаз и ушей. У него не было и волос, так что рыжим его называли условно.  
Говорить он не мог, так как у него не было рта. Носа тоже у него не было. У него не было даже рук и ног. И живота у него не было, и спины у него не было, и хребта у него не было, и никаких внутренностей у него не было. Ничего не было! Так что не понятно, о ком идет речь.  
Уж лучше мы о нем не будем больше говорить. (Kharms, 1997, p. 330)

There was a redheaded man who had no eyes or ears. He didn't have hair either, so he was called a redhead arbitrarily.  
He couldn't talk because he had no mouth. He didn't have a nose either. He didn't even have arms or legs. He had no stomach, he had no back, no spine, and he didn't have any insides at all. There was nothing! So, we don't even know who we're talking about.  
We'd better not talk about him anymore. (Kharms, 2007, p. 45)

It is a deceptively brief story in which a man exists, and then he does not. When this *Incident* is examined in conjunction with Clancy's BE/HAVE nexus,

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<sup>5</sup> Such an act, given the unlikelihood of Kharms ever being able to publish his stories under the Stalin regime, signifies both his desire to have these stories read in a particular order and the implicit existence of a certain unity to the cycle as a whole.

however, key nuances can be observed. Kharms begins with the subject: the redheaded man. At the opening of the text the man is complete. He exists, and he possesses certain traits. Kharms has created life through writing. With a few calculated words and several missing limbs, though, everything shifts. Kharms, not without a certain subtle bravado, moves from Clancy's BECOME to BE to (UNMAKE) in a single sentence. Alternatively, because the BE/HAVE nexus links together conflated concepts expressed by diverse constructions, one could read this as CREATE-EXIST-DESTROY. The lexical expressions of these concepts are limited within the text to the *by* and the *u nego* constructions, but the progression is clear. Kharms moves toward what Matvei Yankelevich calls "annihilation and oblivion" (Yankelevich, 2009, p. 32). He seems to recognize the blend between BE and HAVE and ingeniously uses it to his advantage. Most literally, the redheaded man's body parts are "not existing" – thus the metonymic line is drawn between BE and HAVE. From a reader's perspective, the two concepts begin to merge and the absence of a body part slides from simple POSSESSION into the realm of existentialism and the conceptualization of BE.

As Clancy has claimed, "the negation of fundamental BEING is simply not expressed lexically and is not a part of our everyday experience of living and interacting with the world" (Clancy, 2001, p. 4). He recognizes that being unable to fill the UNBECOMING category slot for existence feels "rather comforting." This in itself is a considerably telling comment, as what Kharms accomplishes with his art can be, in fact, exhilaratingly terrifying. A cognitive approach to the absurdist writer allows us to visualize the gap between the world of logic and Kharms' space of pure order wherein existence is nullified and logic fails to cohere. Where most words fall short, Kharms finds a lexical and syntactic manner in which to express this concept (UNMAKE) that Clancy finds difficult to name precisely – the seemingly contradictory opposite of BEING, of EXISTENCE, of *is*. The careful reader witnesses the illusory and "undefined" presence of the man's NON-EXISTENCE through Kharms' artistic gesture.

The exact differences between the two versions of "Blue Notebook №10" remain somewhat unclear due to the inconsistency of published collections. Nonetheless, one thing is certain given the variants and their implications: Kharms was acutely aware of the different construals offered by choices in diction. What I propose below is based on the following distinction:

*Blue Notebook version*

- (1) Жил один рыжий человек
- (2) Ничего у него не было.

- (1) There lived a redheaded man
- (2) He didn't have anything.

*Incidents version*

- (1b) Был один рыжий человек
- (2b) Ничего не было!

- (1b) There was a readheaded man
- (2b) There was nothing!

In regard to the original, the two major differences between Kharms' drafts illustrate the BE/HAVE blend as concerns the writer's own intentions, as far as one may say so, rather well. The change from (1) to (1b) or (2) to (2b) modifies the cognitive representation drastically and reveals that cognitive blending was part of Kharms' "plan" in editing the text. Cognitive Grammar posits that profiling, the process by which an expression's "specific focus of attention" is derived from its base, is a part of our cognitive organizing of the world and, thus, the way we express what we conceptualize and experience through language (Langacker, 2008, p. 66). Bartmiński likewise stresses the subjective nature of profiling: "The factors which drive profiling are connected with [...] subject-oriented categories: someone's rationality, someone's knowledge of the world, someone's system of values and point of view" (Bartmiński, 2009/2012, p. 89). He goes on to say that not only does a human organizing figure remain at the center of profiling, but that an entire complex of "culturally established" elements takes part as well. In other words, an author imbues a text with his or her own ideas while simultaneously drawing upon the traditions (linguistic, cultural, syntactic even) that exist in a language. This allows for further deconstruction of expectations, as is the case in Kharms' text.

When choosing this draft for the *Incidents*, Kharms placed the redheaded man into a different participatory role – a role in which he lacks any control whatsoever and is subject to the gradual amputation of his body parts. The reader sees this figure, but he is more the textual shell of a man. Craig Hamilton notes that as writers "we can vary the focus of our utterance by putting different participants in different roles" (Hamilton, 2003, p. 4). Precisely so, Peter Stockwell adds, "choosing a patient as the subject (such as in a passive) is a marked expression that requires some special explanatory motivation: defamiliarisation, or evading active responsibility, or encoding secrecy" (Stockwell, 2002, p. 61). In the case of "Blue Notebook №10," defamiliarization is likely the aim. As a rule, the agent of a standard statement or utterance performs the action, while the patient is the receiver of said action. In the second version of "Blue Notebook №10," the man is no longer the agent, but the patient and, as such, events happen to him, rather than *because of* him (Hamilton, 2003, p. 58). He exists in vague terms ("There was"), rather than more concretely and actively ("There lived"). In this story and other *Incidents*, these techniques – "a manipulation of the reader's expectations in regard to content, tone and form" (Nakhimovsky, 1982, p. 70) – defamiliarize logical presumptions about language and the standard experience of reading.

## 4. Scales of Definiteness: Subject and Possession

In conjunction with the BE/HAVE nexus, it will also prove fruitful to consider other forms of cognitive play in Kharms' story, which will allow us to see how



Kharm's language consists of a system of interrelated devices. One such method is linked to Stockwell's (2002) scale of "definiteness," according to which the degree of the reader's familiarity with a text's subject is tracked. Stockwell states: "Definite subjects ('The town', 'that man') are generally preferred to indefinites, and specific indefinites ('a certain Mrs. Jones', 'a girl I know') are preferred to non-specific ones ('a girl')" (p. 61). The man in Kharm's text gradually loses his definiteness, moving from being a so-called "redheaded man" to simply a man and then to the shadow of a person that was once there. And although his lost limbs would seem to distinguish him and give him a certain "definiteness," this too cannot be, for he is soon transformed into blank, impersonal non-existence. Given these points, Kharm seems to want to present the general concept of MAN. The short text is of course not about any one particular redhead, who in any case is called so only by convention, but the general idea of man who suffers existentially, perhaps because of the divide between the absurd and the so-called "logical" world.

Such a sense of "definiteness" can also be observed in the critical difference between (2), in which the *man* himself "possesses" nothing, and (2b), in which there is simply nothing. It is a slight variation, but for Kharm, a scrupulous writer, each word contributes to a greater meaning. Natal'ya Fateeva, in a study of Kharm's manipulations of verbal predication for semantic effect, also notes his preoccupation with linguistic play at this level: "Such deviations, irreducible to semantic standards, stimulate a collision of meanings in the text and generate new meanings, based not only on the shift of usual compatibility, but also on an unusual juxtaposition of semantic spaces" (Fateeva, 2006, p. 310).<sup>6</sup> At the very least, the version of "Blue Notebook №10" in which "there is nothing" illustrates the totality of the man's forced disappearing act. If the *man* possesses nothing, the idea of the man remains; if there is *nothing at all*, then the man can no longer factor into the equation. It again becomes an existential matter, not one of simple POSSESSION, though the semantic connection between the two in Russian remains clear. The variants illustrate Koch's metonymic link between POSSESSION and EXISTENCE. Kharm moves from possession of body parts to the non-existence of man, and the BE/HAVE nexus allows him to do so with careful linguistic sleight-of-hand. The progressive lack of body parts is taken to represent a larger non-existence; the man-ness of the redheaded man is lost. Kharm is performing a complex two-fold metonymic operation: the connection between EXISTENCE and POSSESSION inherent in Russian serves to magnify the gravity of the also metonymic connection between the man's parts and his very conceptualization as MAN. The missing part can no longer define the whole when

<sup>6</sup> Unless otherwise noted, translations from the Russian are my own, J.V.

the man disappears, and as Carrick suggests, the redheaded man is “greater than the sum and the separation of all his parts” (Carrick, 1994, p. 642). By removing the pieces from the entirety, Kharms stakes his claim – in an absurd world, these parts and individual fragments are what truly matter.<sup>7</sup>

The depth of readers’ construal of Kharms’ text will vary widely depending on the sentence variant at hand. It appears that in preparing this *Incident* for a theoretical publication, the author hoped to change the reader’s construal into one that more fully acknowledges the existential nature of BE/HAVE, a truly philosophical matter. This can be said with a high degree of certainty. In the margins of the manuscript to “Blue Notebook №10,” Kharms scribbled “against Kant” (1997, p. 474). Hilary Fink notes that Kharms, in line with the general modernist spirit of anti-Kantianism, “proclaimed that the ‘true’ nature of the wor(l)d may only be grasped through the breakdown of strictly rational modes of apprehension, the abandonment of causality, the birth of the absurd” (Fink, 1998, p. 527). The latter version of “Blue Notebook №10” is an enhanced reflection of this deconstructionist approach to writing and points to this polemic with its atypical form and absurdist content. Thanks to linguistic details, “Blue Notebook №10” takes on even more weighted meaning as Kharms makes use of the blended BE/HAVE prototypes. Moreover, it is through such techniques that, as Graham Roberts argues, “Kharms forces us as readers to engage actively with the text, and to re-examine the assumptions which we make in reading” (Roberts, 1997, p. 97). Roberts suggests that Kharms wrote texts that challenged the conception of the writer as the authoritative figure of a text. In particular, he ascribes to this the content and alogical nature of their writings. I would add that central linguistic features, like those involving the BE/HAVE nexus that implicates the reader and forces him/her to actively “co-create” the meaning of the text, play a large role as well.

## 5. Photograph and Film: Sentence Scanning in “Blue Notebook №10”

Kharms’ cognitive play also involves an inversion of the reader’s natural processes of reading sentences, though this again connects to Clancy’s BE/HAVE nexus and the way that it is used throughout the story. In what Stockwell calls summary scanning, “attributes are collected into a single coherent gestalt

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<sup>7</sup> It is these parts that interested Kharms, who saw in the “proposition of a world that is ‘whole,’” a denial of the “essential role played by its ‘parts’” (Fink, 1998, p. 530).

that constitutes an element." Sequential scanning, on the contrary, "happens when an event or configuration has to be tracked" (2002, p. 66). The former involves nominals and stative conditions (BE) and the latter active changes to a state (perhaps HAVE – the completion of coming into possession of an object).<sup>8</sup> Here is a summarily scanned sentence: "Daniel is tall and dressed like an English dandy." The man's attributes (his man-ness, height, and clothes) – and existence – all congeal in a single, motionless image. Sequentially scanned statements such as "Daniel walked along the edge of the *Dom knigi* balcony in St. Petersburg," on the other hand, require the reader to visualize motion or change. The difference between the two can be compared to a still photograph and a dynamic film clip, respectively. The bulk of "Blue Notebook №10" is made up of existential or attributive statives, which state a condition and should normally undergo summary scanning. Kharms, however, systematically arranges his text in a manner that inverts this cognitive process and puts words and meanings into conflict with one another. The reader is forced to sequentially scan the story of a man losing his body parts without cause. Kharms first states, "There was a redheaded man," which naturally implies certain prerequisites: a complete anatomy and a concrete existence. Before the sentence is over, however, the situation starts to unravel. It would be one thing to say, "There was a man who did not have eyes or ears." It is another to begin with a full body and then to delete parts. In doing so, Kharms shifts from what would under normal circumstances be summarily scanned (an image of a man with or without certain body parts) to a progressively smaller picture taken in through sequential scanning. It requires the reader to see things change gradually, rather than as a series of complete *gestalts*. Arguably, the difference between variants (1) "There lived a redheaded man" and (1b) "There was a redheaded man" also reflects this change. The concept LIFE calls to mind a progression of events that constantly alter the man in one way or another: life as a collection of "incidents" that make up the individual. Thus, LIFE, and the active process of LIVING, is sequentially scanned. BE, on the other hand, is expressed as "there was" (*byl*) in (1b) – an instance of summary scanning. This construal suggests a more static situation. By changing

<sup>8</sup> The notions of sequential and summary scanning, as used by Stockwell, come from Langacker's model of Cognitive Grammar:

Sequential scanning is the mode of processing we employ when watching a motion picture or observing a ball as it flies through the air. The successive states of the conceived event are activated serially and more or less instantaneously, so that the activation of one state begins to decline as that of its successor is initiated... On the other hand, summary scanning is what we employ in mentally reconstructing the trajectory a ball has followed... The component states are activated successively but cumulatively (i.e. once activated they remain active throughout), so that eventually they are all coactivated as a simultaneously accessible whole. (Langacker, 1991, p. 22)

this single verb, Kharms makes a major cognitive move. The verb “was” serves to accentuate the inverted nature of the scanning that takes place immediately after when the man’s body parts are gradually stripped away. It is once again the connections between BE and HAVE in Kharms’ text that accentuate and even allow for such a development.

## 6. The Reasons for Cognitive Play

We can better understand the purpose of all this cognitive play if we consider Hilary Fink’s three approaches to Kharms’ 1930s prose: “the alienation of man in society, the decomposition of language and subsequent failure of communication, and the general incoherence of a world plunged into the madness of Stalinism” (Fink, 1998, p. 528). I believe that in expressing these themes, among many others, throughout his prose miniatures, Kharms used the more unusual aspects of his language, and a reading of his work through the lens of cognitive ethnolinguistics can offer insight into the results of what has been termed “cognitive play.” Kharms did not wish to shock, but rather to bemuse spectators and defy automatized tendencies in both life and art, especially through writing (Komaromi, 2002, p. 422). As such, Fink is absolutely correct in endowing Kharms’ prose with these broader meanings. The texts that comprise the *Incidents* cycle deal with the “expression of the absurd split between man and his surrounding world” (Fink, 1998, p. 528), that is, any world that has been castrated through strict everyday logic. In the final analysis, Kharms’ aesthetic and philosophical concerns are reflected in his words. This facet of language is part of Bartmiński’s linguistic worldview, which is “different than the scientific picture of the world” (2009/2012, p. 36). Such a worldview is subjective and permeated with the author’s conceptualization of reality. Moreover, Kharms’ language not only reflects ideas but even allows the author to *aestheticize* them in stories such as “Blue Notebook №10.” Kharms’ collaborative group, the OBERIU (Union of Real Art), aimed to overcome human logic and its respective idiom by subverting language itself. Aleksandr Kobrinskii has noticed this interest in language as an ontological tool in Kharms’ texts as well as in the mutual concerns of the groups with which he associated:

This suggests that the problem of language as an intermediary between man and the world occupied the other “*Chinary*,” and they actively discussed it at that time. Anticipating the ideas of Whorf and Wittgenstein, Druskin compared the system of linguistic concepts with a net, with which man covers the world. The net allows for understanding and provides the means for people to communicate with one another, but it also becomes an obstacle to a deeper

understanding of the world. It is necessary to create a new net in order to see the world anew. Such an understanding, coincidentally, is close to the ideas expressed in the OBERIU declaration – about the necessity to see the world through “naked eyes.” (Kobrinskii, 2009, p. 362)

Kharms inverts readers’ expectations in “Blue Notebook №10” both on a structural level and in the fact that by the end no content remains. He manages to present the world and man in a new light through the cognitive play he wields, showing, as Roberts writes, “how at least certain languages can shape [or] transform reality” (1997, p. 145). This, of course, occupies a central position in Bartmiński’s ethnolinguistic worldview – the creative force of language. The BE/HAVE nexus allows Kharms to address this concern by making use of the semantic link between the two concepts, and the redheaded man’s parts, removed with precision by Kharms the writer-surgeon, come to signify much more than simple possession in a story that ostensibly appears to be about just that, but, instead, delves into the existential core of human life.

## 7. Beyond “Blue Notebook №10”: Cognitive Play in the *Incidents* Cycle

What follows here is not a comprehensive analysis of the remaining stories in the cycle through the lens of cognitive linguistics, but instead a step in that direction. This sort of analysis reveals how Kharms’ systematic approach to writing is rooted in an understanding of the cognitive and ethnolinguistic nature of language. Kharms makes deft use of not only the BE/HAVE nexus but also other cognitive strategies in the rest of the *Incidents*, sometimes resulting in a fascinating meta-literary commentary on the themes of cognitive play elucidated above. BE in Russian has also been linked to SEEMING and verbs of position. I will address these connections, along with other types of cognitive play, in two further stories: “An Optical Illusion” (*Opticheskii obman*) and “The Trunk” (*Sunduk*).

First, the BE/HAVE nexus is frequently expressed through the “position” category: STAND UP–STAND–SIT DOWN/LIE DOWN or, alternatively, SIT DOWN/LIE DOWN–SIT/LIE–STAND UP (Clancy, 2001, p. 5). Generally, BEING is often rendered through the interaction of an individual upon a given space and how s/he occupies it, whether it be sitting, standing, or lying. In “An Optical Illusion” the character Semyon Semyonovich experiences something quite strange related to this linguistic phenomenon:

Семен Семенович, надев очки, смотрит на сосну и видит: на сосне сидит мужик и показывает ему кулак.

Семен Семенович, сняв очки, видит, что на сосне никто не сидит... (Kharms, 1997, pp. 332-333)

Semyon Semyonovich, having put on his spectacles, looks at a pine tree and this is what he sees: in the pine tree sits a man showing him his fist.

Semyon Semyonovich, taking off his spectacles, looks at the pine tree and sees that no one is sitting in the tree. (Kharms, 2007, p. 50)

The action repeats itself several times before Semyon Semyonovich "doesn't want to believe in this appearance and considers it an optical illusion." Logically it should be the case that the man in the tree either *is* there or *is not*. And yet Kharms challenges this idea, much like he does in "Blue Notebook №10." Kobrinskii has described how Kharms breaks the law of the excluded middle by "introducing the new condition 'to be redheaded arbitrarily.'"<sup>9</sup> Applying the same sort of analysis to "An Optical Illusion," we see that the construction is very similar: the existence ("is sitting") of the *muzhik* achieves a third option in which a spectator's choice controls reality.

Here, Kharms intuitively connects "sits" (*sidit*) and "no one is sitting" (*nikto ne sidit*) to BE and, therefore, EXISTENCE. Sitting and not sitting become synonymous with existence and non-existence. By "considering" the fist-waving *muzhik* an optical illusion, Semyon Semyonovich disrupts a traditional understanding of the world. The man in the tree occupies the same linguistic and metaphysical space as the redheaded man. This, in fact, may be what Kharms himself called the purity of order, a space devoid of logic.<sup>10</sup> Again, the Russian language provides him with the means – at least in part – to express this philosophical idea.

Examining the text more broadly, we see that Kharms grants Semyon Semyonovich the power of the writer. In terms of participatory roles, the protagonist becomes an agent in control of the patient (the *muzhik*) (Hamilton, 2003, p. 58). Hence, Kharms arrives at a meta-commentary on the nature of fiction

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<sup>9</sup> "For example, in logic there exists the law of the excluded middle. Transferring over this law to the situation depicted by Kharms in 'Blue Notebook №10,' it can be said that there is the state 'to be redheaded' and there is the state 'to not be redheaded.' Kharms transforms the two-valued logic into three-valued, introducing the new state 'to be redheaded arbitrarily [by convention].'" (Kobrinskii, 2009, p. 417)

<sup>10</sup> "Thus arises that which can be named in Kharms' own words – 'the purity of order' [*chistota poriadka*]. That is, order which does not depend on any outside conditions or connections." (Kobrinskii, 2009, p. 429)

and existence. Whereas the writer-narrator of “Blue Notebook №10” controls the obliteration of the redheaded man, in this story one character manipulates another’s reality. Simply by “considering” the event an optical illusion, Semyon Semyonovich has wielded the power of conceptual EXISTENCE. Kharms activates this function through a series of cognitive moves: the use of the inherent link between POSITION and EXISTENCE, an alternation of the *muzhik*’s presence in the tree and in reality, and finally the opening of yet another glance into a world of absurdity or nonsense (*chush*).<sup>11</sup>

Much of the same sort of cognitive play continues in “The Trunk” (“*Sunduk*”). Having placed himself in a sealed trunk, the narrator witnesses a fantastic struggle between life and death. The story’s conclusion remains ambiguous with one of the two in the nominative case: “Значит жизнь победила смерть неизвестным для меня способом.” In English, without the aid of case endings, the English translator must make a choice. This passage typically reads: “That means that life defeated death by a method unknown to me” (Kharms, 2007, p. 55). The English is explicit in its construal of the outcome – an issue I will address in the following section. In the original, however, because Kharms renders the long-necked man an uninvolved patient and observer of this battle between life and death, it remains unclear.<sup>12</sup>

As an example of a slightly different form of cognitive play that Kharms deploys in this text, we may consider Lakoff’s container metaphor, which also represents the man’s experience within the trunk. Inside, he undergoes some sort of transformation by removing himself from logical reality and placing himself in a space where the metaphorical “battle between life and death” is literalized. Friedrich Ungerer and Hans-Jörg Schmid write: “Although metaphor is a conceptual phenomenon, we have access to the metaphors that structure our way of thinking through the language we use” (2006, p. 118). Kharms in this manner uses Russian to construct a world in which metaphor bleeds into reality. The ideas LIFE and DEATH exist within the trunk *and* the man. They are encapsulated in the trunk by the experiment, while the man always contains the potential for both. Ungerer and Schmid continue: “We think of our minds as containers for ideas” (p. 126). The man then is a metaphorical vessel for the two, which adopt more prototypically agential roles than he. His existence is reduced to this precise moment in which he lacks all control. In this way Kharms suggests that within the container (a body) LIFE and DEATH exist beyond human control.

<sup>11</sup> On a further level, we can read this text as commentary of the self-deceptive power of logic and the universal human inability to completely comprehend one’s own self and motivations.

<sup>12</sup> Kharms himself noted the ambiguity of his language on the manuscript (Kharms, 1997, p. 480).

The man's hands might be forced to move by life and not necessarily by an active desire to live. Death, though, the narrator says, is "naturally...victorious" as if it is a forgone conclusion.

Such anthropomorphizing of LIFE and DEATH is not unique. In fact, it is prototypical: LIFE and DEATH as two forces locked in relentless battle. Death *takes* lives; life *favors* someone. The multiple cognitive layers Kharms develops in "The Trunk," however, are exceptional: BE/HAVE blending, container metaphor, agent/patient roles. Kharms deftly places everything, from the existence of the air the man breathes (or does not) to the metaphysical trunk, into question by constantly shifting primary agency among the three parties involved. Moreover, humans as agents typically control ideas, not the other way around. The man only "seems" to understand what has occurred. This verb once again connects with Clancy's nexus as another expression of BE – things *seem* to be, *seem* to exist. The reality of what truly transpires within the trunk remains unknown because there is no solid truth that one may grasp. The man possesses only fallible understanding (*kazhetsya*), and the trunk creates another instance of the break from the logical world, realized through Kharms' curious language.

## 8. Cognitive Analysis of Kharms in an Ethnolinguistic Perspective: Translations and the Encoding of Language

Returning to "Blue Notebook №10," we may consider the ethnolinguistic implications of the preceding analysis with reference to translations of the text. This will be useful for several reasons. First, it spotlights the dichotomy between Russian as a BE-language and English as a HAVE-language.<sup>13</sup> The BE/HAVE nexus, functional in Russian, simply cannot exist in English. Furthermore, a translator's choices reveal the very ways that we as readers construe a work of literature by opting to focus on one subtext or layer of a work over another. Yankelevich's collection of translations contains both versions of the story and aligns with the proposed differences elaborated upon earlier. Others, such as Neil Cornwell's *Incidences* (Kharms, 2006), either translate (1b)/(2) for the *Incidents* cycle version or another combination of variants, e.g. (1)/(2b).<sup>14</sup> Even translating the cycle's

<sup>13</sup> A Czech translation offers the same HAVE-oriented results: "Byl jednou jeden zrzavý člověk, který neměl oči ani uši... Neměl prostě vůbec nic!" (Charms, 1994, p. 9).

<sup>14</sup> This problem is also rampant in Russian editions of the story, which tend to vary widely regardless of which version (*Golubaya tetrad'* or *Sluchai*) is intended for publication.



title, *Sluchai* (Случаи), has been problematic; English renderings include: *Events*, *Incidences*, *Incidents*, and *Happenings*. One can only imagine that Kharms would have been pleased to see such a horde of meaning springing from a single word.

In the English translations there is a consistent preference for expressions of HAVE ("He had no X, he had no Y"), and it seems fairly obvious that this would be the case. English, unlike Russian, lacks a way to concisely state what the latter suggests in a sentence such as, "*U nego nebylo ruk*." The ambiguity and complicated subtexts are quite literally lost in translation. The Russian can be interpreted as the man possessed no hands, there were no hands existing (near him), or even all at once. The task of the English translator, then, is to determine which meaning – and thus construal – is most vital to preserving the intent of the text, while maintaining the brevity and minimalism of Kharms' language.

This highly complex linguistic task, of course, aligns with Bartmiński's understanding of the linguistic worldview as "a language-entrenched interpretation of reality, which can be expressed in the form of judgements about the world, people, things or events. It is an interpretation, not a reflection" (Bartmiński, 2009/2012, p. 23). The language Kharms uses in his texts, particularly "Blue Notebook №10," shows how both writer and reader conceptualize reality through language. A single difference in diction *can* contribute to a major semantic shift. In this way, Bartmiński notes how the "subject" acts "as the prime experiencing, conceptualising and coding authority" (p. 222). Kharms then pushes his reader in a certain direction with his linguistic choices, and the cognitive processes at work help disclose the larger thematic issues he wishes to explore. Using a cognitive and ethnolinguistic approach allows us to see how Kharms' language in fact acts less like a mirror and proclaims its own system of devices and referents. It brings together culturally relevant expectations (literary, linguistic, and so on) precisely in order to disrupt and challenge them, and it provides both writer and reader with the power of interpretation.

## 9. Conclusion

Vladimir Nabokov said that readers should feel good literature as an indescribable tingle in the spine. He proposes reading as not entirely a cognitive task based in brain function, but one that has a more physical, tangible effect – the "highest form of emotion that humanity has attained when evolving pure art" (Nabokov, 1980, p. 65). But the good reader can also sense great literature elsewhere. Kharms, I believe, is felt in the gut. His prose produces the same feeling on the reader as the shift in inertia does on the rider of a roller coaster. Bartmiński champions the "subject," who is "experienced empirically," as central to cognitive ethnolinguistics and as long ignored by structural linguistics. This, in fact, lies at the heart of the present analysis. Kharms' language falls into a

mutually dependent relationship with the reader. As it challenges us with odd semantics and atypical processes, we interpret it strangely. Without typical grounded causality or a logical reality in Kharms' texts, we are left with the floor falling out below our feet, plunging toward a hitherto unfamiliar and overwhelmingly disconcerting plane of understanding. His cognitive inversions play a large role in how a reader processes the stories. A better understanding of these elements of Kharms' Russian can help provide more complete insight into his literary and thematic aims. Though we are not bound to read the *Incidents* in any one specific way, the manner in which Kharms constructed the cycle leads us down certain paths, at times alogical or circular, that highlight his philosophical concerns and observations.

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